

Tucson Resident Engineer Wins HENAAC Luminary Award

Contributed by Mike Tharp
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Actor Brian Keith was nominated for an Emmy three times for his role as Uncle Bill Davis in the 1966-71 TV series, "A Family Affair." Indirectly, he is also part of another honor—Julie Martinez's Professional Achievement Luminary Award presented to her Oct. 5 at the annual Hispanic Engineer National Achievement Awards Corporation (HENAAC) conference in the Anaheim, Calif., Convention Center.

Martinez, Tucson Resident Engineer—the first woman ever to hold such a position in the Los Angeles District—recalls watching the television show as a girl in San Pedro, Calif. "The whole reason I wanted to be an engineer was Uncle Bill in 'A Family Affair,'" she explains. "He built dams all over the world, and it was so exotic to me."

Like Uncle Bill, Martinez trained as a civil engineer. After receiving her degree from San Diego State University, she joined the Corps and literally has never looked back. "I'm a tomorrow thinker," she says. "You're only as good as your last failure."

The failures have been few during Martinez's 20-year career with the District, and the successes plentiful. Calling her "a superb leader, engineer, manager and role model," Col. Alex Dornstauder, Los Angeles District Engineer, cited her work in Tucson "as the most productive field office in the region."

John Keever, Area Engineer for the Arizona/Nevada Area Office, and someone Martinez credits as being one of her role models, said she "dedicated herself to project delivery for customers, stakeholders and the public at large. At the same time, she has been the foundation for her family—dependable, assertive and trustworthy."

Maj. Brad Endres of the Arizona/Nevada Area Office, said Martinez "leads our largest resident office with over \$75 million in construction placement scheduled for fiscal year 2006 with a staff of 14 personnel. Some of the District's most highly visible projects are under her domain: the Nogales Wash flood drainage reduction project, the Global Information Center at Fort Huachuca and the Tucson Drainage flood damage reduction project in downtown Tucson."

Receiving the HENAAC award from Lt. Gen. Carl Strock, Chief of Engineers, South Pacific Division Commander Col. John McMahon and Dornstauder, Martinez was praised for "being responsible for all Corps of Engineers construction activities and engineering responsibilities in southern Arizona." That includes the particularly important collaboration with the Dept. of Homeland Security for customs and border protection, as well as Davis-Monthan Air Force Base's Air Combat Command.

She was also publicly applauded for her work on the high-profile Pier 400 project at the Port of Los Angeles and for volunteering after destructive Hurricane Hugo struck Puerto Rico, where Martinez helped repair public utilities.

Other Luminary honorees included women and men from the Air Force Research Laboratory, the U.S. Coast Guard, the SPAWAR Systems Center, NASA's Ames Research Center, as well as engineers and managers from such blue-chip corporations as Dow Chemical, Boeing, Ford, DaimlerChrysler, Raytheon and General Motors.

"I'm very humbled," says Martinez. "To be in that company—I'm a little surprised."

If you looked only at her early upbringing, you might be surprised too. Martinez was born in San Pedro, a blue-collar seaport town at the tip of the Palos Verdes Peninsula, some 25 miles south of downtown LA. She was the second of six children to a first-generation American father and a Mexican national mother. "In my world—the men ruled the roost and women were there to serve. Anything I learned about mechanics or construction was by looking over my brothers' shoulders," she wrote in an autobiographical essay.

But Martinez realized early on she was different from the other women in her family, and after they moved to San Diego, she breezed through high school, graduating at age 16. Two years later, her parents moved back to Mexico to start a business, basically handing her the house and car keys and telling her to take care of her siblings while running the U.S. side of the business.

That's why it took her eight years to struggle through San Diego State, after which she immediately joined the Corps. "I could see the diversity and the opportunity to learn and to try a variety of things and in this I have never been disappointed," she wrote. "There could have been no better choice for a girl who knew she didn't know so many things but couldn't wait to learn."

Coincidentally, one of the biggest projects she has worked on for the District was Pier 400 in the Los Angeles Harbor, a short walk for many of her family members. "It was very special to me," she recalls, "and there were a lot of questions at pretty much every family gathering in San Pedro."

For that she was given the Corps's 2000 Construction Management Excellence Award for supervising \$180 million in large dredging, landfill and deep-draft navigation projects in and around the Ports of LA and Long Beach. She maintained "an aggressive safety program and exceptional partnering programs," the award read. "Her coordination skills with the sponsors earned her high marks in the District and exceptional performance ratings for the past three years."

Besides Pier 400, other mega-projects Martinez was heavily involved with included the San Luis Rey River, Los Angeles River and Prado Dam.

Besides Keever, other positive influences on her career have included Terry King and Lt. Gen. Robert Van Antwerp, former Los Angeles District Engineer.

Martinez is at once proud and clear-eyed about the cultural influences of her Hispanic heritage. "I come from a culture that didn't encourage education, even among men," she explains. "It was work. But getting this award and hearing a lot of the people (at the convention) speaking Spanish, I'm impressed and a little surprised that we've achieved the levels we have as a group in science and technology. I'm encouraged to help keep this going."

Many of her family members still live in Mexico. "They range from the top 2 percent of the economy to the normal bottom—farmers, ranchers, those who live off the land," she says. "They all have a lot of richness in that culture. It's so much about family."

And so it is with Martinez herself. Her mother, who is ill, lives with her in Tucson, and Martinez has buried her father and a sister in recent years. "In the struggle between family and job, family wins," she says, "but I have a boss, John Keever, who is so understanding."

Moving from a county of 10 million and a hyper-profile project list has caused her to make some adjustments. "It has been interesting," she says, quickly praising "the stunning quality and work ethic" of her fellow team members in Arizona. The desert around Tucson "sometimes has its own quiet beauty," she allows, "and you re-think things in a place like Tucson."

And, says the lifelong gardener, accustomed to the balmy climate of San Pedro and San Diego, "I had to re-learn how to grow things."

In an April 4, 1966, segment of "A Family Affair," the wealthy bachelor consulting engineer Uncle Bill finally decides to forego globetrotting and become a full-time father to the three children who moved in with him after the death of their parents. Her mother and family, the Corps, the District and future Hispanic engineers are all fortunate that Julie Martinez doesn't have to make that decision.